
The European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH): From Policy to Practice and from Practice to Policy

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Introduction

Over one in five EU citizens are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This phenomenon has remained relatively stable over the last years, even decades. Homelessness is for sure the most extreme manifestation of poverty and social exclusion. Contrary to the general stable picture of poverty and social exclusion in Europe, we see a homelessness scene that is increasingly crowded. It is therefore no surprise that homelessness is becoming very visible in Europe. More and more people are living on the streets or in public spaces and a growing group of people rely on emergency accommodation. During the day they are wandering in the streets and rely on people's generosity to survive. Some people experiencing homelessness are less visible because they just prolong their stay in penal or health care institutions if a home is not (yet) available. Others seek refuge in mobile homes or stay a period of time with friends or family to avoid rooflessness.

At European level, a consensus has been developing that homelessness and housing exclusion, such as rooflessness, are human and social rights violations. They diminish a person's dignity, severely affect the quality of life of people, limit the person's interactions with the wider society, reduce their productive potential, and are a waste of human capital. Different EU institutions therefore called for a concerted and comprehensive European approach to combat homelessness.

We thus see in Europe an expanding problem of homelessness and a growing recognition that concerted efforts and policy measures are needed to tackle it at local, national, and European levels. At the same time, it is being realised that it is possible to solve this European wide problem with European-based solutions. Witness to this is the fact that Finland has managed to reverse the trend in home-

lessness. According to statistics of the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA), in 2008-2022 the number of people experiencing homelessness decreased by 54% and the number of people experiencing long-term homelessness by 68%. This exemplary national effort to tackle homelessness has motivated the country to solve the problem by 2027 (Y-Foundation, 2022).

The experience of Finland has inspired and motivated many countries and activists. But it cannot be just copy-pasted since situations in countries and regions differ to a great extent. That it is possible to go beyond a one-size-fits-all solution was evidenced in a ground breaking publication of the Housing Solutions Platform¹: The “50 Out-of-the-Box Housing Solutions to Homelessness and Housing Exclusion” (2019).

The European Pillar of Social Rights, launched in Gothenburg (Denmark) during the Juncker administration, called the shots in 2017 and made explicit reference to the action needed to combat homelessness. In 2021, the current Commission took the initiative to launch a European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH).

In this article we will zoom in on this European Platform to see how it can be understood as a specific example of collective policy making, collective learning, and collective action at the European level because it is underpinned by two mutually reinforcing mechanisms: multi-stakeholdership and multilevel governance. We will also try to draw some lessons from the first years of functioning of EPOCH in a view to contribute to its mission to effectively combat homelessness.

European-Level Efforts to Combat Homelessness

In the beginning, the European project only timidly looked at social policy as an integral and necessary dimension of its collective effort to advance the welfare of its citizens. Initially, for example, steps were taken to coordinate social security systems and the European Social Fund was established. But after long debates between European institutions, Member States, and stakeholders, new social policy provisions were taken time and again.

At this moment, the EU project has a strong social and fundamental rights dimension. This was re-enforced by the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Article 3 of the *Treaty of the European Union* lays down that the Union has the duty to aim at full employment and social progress. Combating social exclusion is one of the common objectives of the EU and its Member States.

¹ The Housing Solutions Platform is a partnership between FEANTSA, Fondation Abbé Pierre, and Housing Europe.

Many times and in different ways European institutions have called for collective attention and action for homelessness, the most extreme form of social exclusion. In 2005, for example, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) Council, which brings together the Ministers responsible for Social Affairs, Employment, and Health of the EU Member States, identified homelessness as a priority. In June 2012, EPSCO asked the Commission “to develop and promote adequate schemes for persons who are homeless” (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.11).

In 2008, the *European Parliament* issued a written declaration on ending street homelessness. It called on the Commission to develop an EU framework definition of homelessness, to gather comparable and reliable statistical data, and to provide annual updates on action taken and progress made in Member States toward ending homelessness². This was followed by another written statement in 2014³, and resolutions in 2011⁴ and 2014⁵.

The *Committee of the Regions* issued a so-called own-initiative opinion on combating homelessness in 2010 and later again in 2014. The *European Economic and Social Committee* took a similar initiative in 2011. *The Commission* itself reflected on the matter and wrote a Staff Working Document, entitled “Confronting Homelessness in the European Union”, in 2013. The document was accompanied by a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions.⁶

In the same year, the *Irish Presidency* organised an informal round table on the subject (Culhane and Randall, 2013). The final communication stated that “the Commission should support and facilitate Member States in their efforts to combat homelessness through implementation of the Social Investment Package in a defined way.”

The Juncker Commission (2014 – 2019) committed further to social fairness and a ‘Social Triple A’ for the EU. One of the masterpieces of this Commission was the *European Pillar of Social Rights*. The Pillar, with its 20 Principles, was proclaimed in 2017 at the Gothenburg Summit (Denmark) by the European Parliament, the European Council, and the European Commission. It was acclaimed by the

² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2008-0163_EN.html?redirect.

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2010-0499_EN.html?redirect.

⁴ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-0383_EN.html?redirect.

⁵ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2014-0043_EN.html?redirect.

⁶ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ebf7ae74-f090-4459-bed8-1530ce4b8f69/language-en>

European social partners and a wide range of civil society organisations. In its *Principle 19, the European Pillar of Social Rights stresses the need for social housing or housing assistance of good quality for those in need, the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction for vulnerable people and adequate shelter and services for people experiencing homelessness*. In the aftermath of the Gothenburg Summit, the European Commission established an Inter-service Working Group on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion to see how the different services of the Commission that were dealing with housing and poverty issues could streamline, coordinate, and intensify their efforts to combat homelessness. The *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*, elaborated in 2021 by Commissioner Nicolas Schmit during the current European Commission (2019 – 2024), intends to turn the 20 Principles into concrete actions. The Action Plan is a policy response to the consecutive and consonant pleas of different European institutions to do something about the expanding problem of housing exclusion and at the same time a timely translation of a broad-based call for it amongst the European population.

The Action Plan⁷ states that “access to affordable housing is an increasing concern in many Member States, regions and cities. Homelessness is increasing in most Member States. While policies to end homelessness can only be successful through a tailored local or regional approach, many stakeholders have called for a European impetus to end homelessness across the EU by 2030.” The Plan explicitly referred to the European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2020. With the Action Plan the European Commission announced that it envisaged the launch of a European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH) to support Member States, cities, and service providers in sharing best practices and identifying efficient and innovative approaches.

The European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH)

One of the main priorities of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, in the first semester of 2021, was to strengthen the social component of the European Union. Although in the midst of the corona-crisis, the Portuguese Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, Ana Mendes Godinho, together with the European Commission, organised a High-Level Conference on 21 June 2021 in Lisbon to debate homelessness and to agree on a joint strategy with European institutions, Member States, and civil society organisations. Several people with homelessness experience also got on the stage and gave witness of how they became homeless, what it means to be homeless, and how they found exits to their

⁷ <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/#A76>.

dire situation. On that occasion, national ministers as well as representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of Regions, civil society organisations (Feantsa, the Social Platform, Housing Europe, Social Economy Europe), social partners (ETUC, SGI Europe), and cities (Eurocities, Council of European Municipalities and Regions) signed the *Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH)*.

The signatories pledged to work together under the umbrella of the Platform and to deliver actions within their respective competences. They agreed on the following ambitious objective of ending homelessness by 2030 so that (a) no one sleeps rough for lack of accessible, safe and appropriate emergency accommodation; (b) no one lives in emergency or transitional accommodation longer than is required for successful move-on to a permanent housing solution; (c) no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing; (d) evictions should be prevented whenever possible and no one is evicted without assistance for an appropriate housing solution, when needed and (e) no one is discriminated due to their homelessness status.

The ambition of the EPOCH is to realise this through the promotion of policies based on a person-centred, Housing-Led, and integrated approach. The signatories of the Declaration are convinced that a policy that tries to manage the problem of homelessness, through the provision of shelter or other humanitarian assistance, is insufficient and inadequate. Preference is given to the promotion of policies that more fundamentally tackle the problems related to homelessness.

But What Does It Mean to ‘End Homelessness’?

So far, there is no internationally recognised definition to ‘ending homelessness and rooflessness’. Two options would apply. A first one is to aim at an ‘*absolute end*’ to homelessness, whereby nobody is homeless anymore as from a certain point-in-time, and the risk of becoming homeless, in any form it can take (sleeping on the street, relying on temporary shelter with a friend...), is completely excluded. The second is called the ‘*functional zero*’ homelessness, where homelessness becomes a manageable problem and the policy measures, the available resources, and services are appropriate and sufficient to deal with homelessness associated problems. Reaching functional zero implies that we apply the tools necessary to make homelessness rare and exceptional. Also, that when it is occurs, it is brief and permanently resolved thereafter. This approach is more realistic and pragmatic than the first option because it accepts that it is quasi impossible to solve the problem of people who are defined or considered ‘voluntary homeless’ or do not

accept housing offers. Still, the functional zero approach does not exclude adhering to an absolute end option as an aspirational goal (Develtere, 2022). It is clear that the EPOCH community opted for the second approach and aims at functional zero.

The Platform immediately went into action after the Lisbon summit. Notwithstanding the practical problems linked to the COVID crisis and the hindrances to meet in-person, multiple interactions and meetings started between the different stakeholders. Under the Slovenian Presidency (second semester of 2021), the discussion focused on the actual work programme of the Platform.

The Platform intensively discussed the issue of homelessness, different national approaches, and strategies, but also listened to key stakeholders, the leadership of FEANTSA and its members, activists, academics, and researchers. One of them was Julien Damon, a French academic, editorialist, and author of 'La Question SDF' ('The Problem of People Without a Stable Home') (Damon, 2021). He, amongst others, insisted on the fact that the popular image of a person experiencing homelessness tends to be someone sleeping on the street or in a place not intended for human habitation. These so-called "homeless people" account for only a very small part of homeless service users. So, people experiencing homelessness narrowly construed, Damon explained, include neither people who are houseless and so forced to stay in a B&B or staying with someone else or in a squat. Likewise, people in particular types of shelter, such as temporary structures or improvised shelters, are not counted in this category. This is anything but a residual clarification then, and establishing a continuum of situations from people in ordinary housing to 'homeless' street-based sleepers could warrant a revisiting of the entire 'homelessness issue', this time including the home.

This discussion pushed the members of the Platform to apply for a broad definition of homelessness and rooflessness as was suggested by a 2007 study commissioned by the European Commission (Edgar et al., 2007): *the ETHOS Light classification*. This typology defines homelessness and housing exclusion as encompassing six categories: people sleeping on the streets, people in emergency accommodation, people living in accommodation for the homeless, people remaining in institutions because of lack of housing, people living in non-conventional dwellings (such as mobile homes) due to lack of housing, and people experiencing homelessness living temporarily in conventional housing with family or friends due to lack of housing.

The dialogue with Damon and other prime witnesses of the homelessness sector also learned that there are three types of countries in the EU: those with no significant investment or integrated homelessness strategy; those that have no integrated

strategy but have or are allocating resources, mainly to provide temporary shelter; and those with an integrated, explicit, and solid strategy to eradicate the homelessness and housing exclusion problem in the country.

EPOCH as an Example of Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

As we mentioned, the Platform kick-started with the Lisbon Declaration in 2021. The idea behind EPOCH was, and is, that the engagement of a variety of stakeholders is needed to find a variety of solutions to the problems of homelessness and housing exclusion. Realising Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights is not the sole responsibility of the European institutions. Nor was it the sole task of the Member States. Local authorities, civil society, and social economy actors are also involved and take up their responsibility. This choice for a multi-stakeholder arrangement, which is very unique in the European setting, implies three things.

First, the principle of *co-management of the EPOCH*. The Platform is guided by a Steering Board that provides guidance, prepares the work programme, monitors the delivery of the work programme's outputs, and ensures oversight of progress in the fight against homelessness. The Steering Board is composed of representatives of EU institutions, of the EU Council Trio of Presidencies, as well as of civil society.

The Chair of the Steering Board has a central role in connecting the Members of the Platform and ensuring communication amongst them. In particular, the Chair advocates on behalf of the Platform in order to enhance the visibility of its mission with the Member States and relevant stakeholders. He also liaises with the rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU in setting the political priorities and steers the discussions in the Steering Board.

Meetings of the Platform at ministerial level are convened at least every second year by the incumbent Presidency of the Council of the EU. This already happened under Portuguese and French Presidencies. The Plenary meetings of the Platform are convened by each incumbent Presidency of the Council of the EU, or at the request of the Steering Board. They bring together the Member States at expert level, the European Institutions and civil society. After the signing of the Lisbon Declaration, the Platform was extended with two new members: Eurodiaconia, a European network of Protestant NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice and the International Union of Tenants, a non-governmental and not-for-profit membership organisation of national tenants' organisations. The Secretariat of the Platform, which is responsible for managing its daily operation, is arranged for by the Commission.

Secondly, multi-stakeholdership implies that there is a common ground and understanding of the mission of the platform. This is translated in a *common work plan*. The work plan was discussed and agreed upon during the French Presidency in 2022, and covers the period 2022 – 2024. In other words, the period under the current Commission.

The work plan foresees *three work streams*. One work stream sets in motion a number of activities that will help us to better understand the problem of homelessness, to *measure* it, and to *monitor* progress. In this work package we focus on a common definition of homelessness, on stimulating and harmonising counting methodologies, and on ways to look at evolutions in terms of numbers of people experiencing homelessness and their profiles. This work has to help policy-makers and other stakeholders to justify their investments in projects and programmes, to evaluate their effectiveness and impact, as well as to steer or reorient them.

A second work stream foresees a multitude of activities that stimulate *mutual learning*. Authorities, national, regional, and local, but also other stakeholders, exchange experiences in preventing homelessness. But they also want to learn from each other on how to design Housing-Led strategies, how to deal with specific groups of vulnerable people such as women, children, or migrants, how to cater for the needs of the people experiencing homelessness when there is an epidemic like the Covid crisis, how to communicate about homelessness, how to make the housing market more inclusive, etc.

A third work stream relates to *access to finance*. At the European level, there are a multiplicity of possibilities to finance homelessness-related projects and programmes such as the European Social Fund (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund, the InvestEU programme, and the European Union Recovery Instrument (New Generation EU). However, very often national and local authorities develop projects and programmes for people experiencing homelessness that are not cognizant of the existing funding possibilities. The same goes for the many civil society and social economy actors involved in the field of homelessness.

Thirdly, multi-stakeholdership implies a *division of labour*. In other words, the realisation of the action plan is a joint engagement, but not everybody does everything together at the same time. In this, the principle of subsidiarity, which is key in the European ‘household’, is the golden rule or compass of EPOCH. The European institutions, and especially the European Commission, do not take over the role of the Member States nor the role of regional and local authorities and non-state actors. Every actor plays the role that is best suited for them.

The European Commission is not only the secretariat of the Platform, but also functions as a facilitator, a convener, and a funder. It also supports monitoring. It requested the OECD to produce a policy toolkit to help Member States to develop national strategies. In addition, the Commission stimulates monitoring through the Social Protection Committee that is looking at the overall evolutions of social indicators in the Member States. The Commission is also involved in the measurement of homelessness. On the demand of the European Parliament, the Commission set up a Pilot Project to count the number of people experiencing homelessness in cities all around Europe.

EPOCH as an Example of Multi-Level Governance

Combating homelessness is an uphill struggle. It needs a collaborative effort of actors who operate at different, yet interconnected, levels. EPOCH was created to be a platform that mobilises actors at all levels of European society, from the local up to the European level, in a dynamic and mutually reinforcing way. EPOCH is instrumental in developing appropriate policies that can be translated in effective action on the ground. At the same time, there is room for positive feedback loops when lessons are learned from the concrete projects and programmes that are useful to finetune the policy making.

In the previous section we already had a look at the key actors that are involved at the European level. All of them have multiple ways to represent the realities on the ground at national, regional, and local levels and at the same time to give these realities certain stimuli.

The European institutions work in a concerted way with the governments and institutions of the Member States. They provide forums to the Member States to discuss the issue, to exchange, and to learn from each other. As such, the issue of homelessness comes to their joint table when Ministers of Social Affairs or national officials meet. Sometimes homelessness is the only point on the agenda, as was the case when the Platform was launched in 2021. Sometimes homelessness is part of a broader discussion, for example when the EU Disability Strategy is on the table, or the EU Roma Framework, the EU Gender Equality Strategy, or again the EU Child Guarantee.

Funding is a forceful tool to stimulate and support action on the ground. The European Commission, but also the European Investment Bank and the Council of Europe Bank, have a variety of funds and programmes to finance local, regional, and national initiatives. Within EPOCH, a working group has been created to look

at these funding opportunities and to see how creative mechanisms, such as blending loans with grants, can help local authorities and other actors to get access to the much needed funding.

EPOCH seeks to work intensively with non-state actors that are well rooted at local level and networked at national and European level. FEANTSA, the Social Platform, Housing Europe, Social Economy Europe, ETUC, SGI Europe, Eurocities, and Council of European Municipalities and Regions were among the initiators of the Platform. Since then, Eurodiaconia and the International Tenants Union also signed the Lisbon Declaration. This expanding community of civil society organisations undoubtedly represents the vast majority of the action already taken on the ground to combat homelessness. This includes services such as shelter, medical and food assistance, social rental initiatives, and Housing-Led strategies. With special regard to FEANTSA members, they have a long experience, profound understanding of the origins and realities of homelessness, and daily contacts with people experiencing homelessness or having lived through periods of homelessness. They are learning-by-doing experts and stimulate the Platform to find solutions to homelessness that go beyond the management of it.

The Way Forward

“A civilization can be measured by how it treats its weakest members”. This quotation is often wrongly attributed to Mahatma Gandhi but holds a lot of truth. It is certainly applicable for the reality of expanding homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe. All Member States must be committed to the European Pillar of Social Rights. Translating Principle 19 of the Pillar into policies and actions that reduce homelessness to a functional zero level is key in proving that Europe stands loyal to its values.

This is the tremendous task of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness. It has therefore been created as an open Platform, as a joint venture of authorities and non-state actors, and as a facilitator and stimulator for both policy-making and concrete action.

This kind of a European Platform is a novel way of contributing to social policy and change making. Its multi-actor approach and multi-level governance fit well with the complex nature of the problems addressed and the multi-layered European house. It is based on local and national experience, it monitors and stimulates these decentralised initiatives, and calls local and national authorities and actors that are not as yet fully committed and involved to join this European wide effort to combat homelessness and housing exclusion.

The Platform needed time to be constructed and to put in motion its three work-streams of Measurement and Monitoring, Mutual Learning, and Access to Funding. It now needs extension, endurance, and expertise.

Extension means that the Platform will have to make everything more visible, the problem of homelessness as well as the solutions to it. It also means that more and more stakeholders, both state and non-state actors, will have to adhere to the objectives of the Platform. It further implies that all of these actors will get into action.

Endurance will be needed to realise, or at least to come close to, the high ambitions set in Lisbon, the objective of eradicating homelessness by 2030. Only with stamina and perseverance, as well as with the explicit support of the next Commissions and national governments, will the Platform and its constituencies be able to keep the momentum and the drive beyond 2030. Without a doubt there will be a permanent need for continuous attention for the causes and mechanisms driving people into homelessness, even after 2030 when we have the policy toolkit active and running.

Therefore, the Platform has to invest systematically in gathering and building *expertise* at local, national, and European levels. It is the only way to move continuously from policy to action and from action to policy.

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